

# The SAFER Latinos Project: Addressing a Community Ecology Underlying Latino Youth Violence

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**Abstract** This paper describes the intervention model, early implementation experience, and challenges for the *Seguridad, Apoyo, Familia, Educacion, y Recursos* (SAFER) Latinos project. The SAFER Latinos project is an attempt to build the evidence for a multilevel participatory youth violence prevention model tailored to the specific circumstances of Central

American immigrants. Specific circumstances targeted in this intervention are decreased family cohesion as a result of sequential immigration (i.e., parents arriving first and bringing their children years later or youth arriving without parents); multiple school barriers; community disorganization and low community efficacy; limited access to services; and a social context (including gang presence) that is linked to youth norms supporting violence. In its implementation, the initial intervention model was adapted to address barriers and challenges. These are described, along with lessons learned and the ongoing evaluation.

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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## Introduction

This paper describes the intervention model, early implementation experience, and challenges for the *Seguridad, Apoyo, Familia, Educacion, y Recursos* (SAFER) Latinos project, a collaboration between the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services Department of Prevention and Community Health (GWU), the Latin American Youth Center (LAYC), the Latino Federation of Greater Washington (LFGW, formerly called the Council of Latino Agencies [CLA]), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). SAFER

Latinos was designed to address selected individual-, family-, and community-modifiable, mediating factors for youth violence in the immigrant Latino community of Langley Park, MD, a Washington, DC, suburb.<sup>1</sup> Because follow-up data collection has just been completed (not yet analyzed), a discussion of evaluation results and effectiveness of the model will be the focus of subsequent papers.

The SAFER Latinos project is one of a small number of grants awarded by the CDC to implement primary prevention strategies that focus on the community itself, not just on a specific cohort of individuals who participate, for example, in a school-based or family-centered prevention program. Though some of these more targeted prevention programs have an impact with respect to risk and protective factors for violence (National Institutes of Health [NIH] 2004; US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] 2001), the youth or families who participate in them are often embedded in communities where violence is endemic and where the impact of targeted programs is therefore blunted. Thus, funding for the SAFER Latinos program was intended in part to assess an approach to prevention that addresses aggregate community factors.

### Youth Violence and Prevention Efforts

The continued development of effective youth violence prevention approaches is highly important because of the high toll of violence in injuries and deaths, especially among minorities. Data indicate that youth violence in some areas has increased in the past few years after a long decline, particularly among selected high-poverty communities and among youth under age 25 (Butts and Snyder 2006). Homicide is the leading cause of death for African American youth ages 10–24, the second leading cause of death for Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander youth, and the third leading cause for American Indian and Alaska Native youth (CDC 2007). Despite the multiple prevention efforts, these recent increases in youth violence are a reminder that effective prevention is still a work in progress.

<sup>1</sup> Note that selected descriptive/demographic data are presented in this article; however, baseline data analysis, including examination of the validity of the etiological model, will be reviewed in a separate article.

Over at least the past two decades, a substantial amount of research on youth violence and its prevention has resulted in the accumulation of evidence-based or model programs, available through compendia such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) *Model Programs Guide* (MPG), the Blueprints Program (University of Colorado, see Mihalic et al. 2001), the Surgeon General's Report (DHHS 2001), and the CDC *Best Practices* (Thornton et al. 2002). The majority of such programs are targeted to individual, family, or school-based risk factors within a specific cohort of program participants. Yet, substantial research has identified community-level factors that contribute to violence, including issues of neighborhood disadvantage (e.g., Freisthler et al. 2005; Curry and Spergel 1988; Wilson 1987) and street markets (for illegal drugs and other goods) together with the prevalence of violent "street codes" and availability of weapons (e.g., Anderson 1990, 1992; Edberg 2004; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Blumstein 1995; Blumstein and Wallman 2000; Herrenkhol et al. 2000; Lipsey and Derzon 1998; Wilkinson 2004). Sampson et al. (1997) have also linked the degree of community efficacy to violence and other health risks; however, data on specific interventions addressing community efficacy have not yet been reported in the literature. Although there have been recent reports documenting the effectiveness of a few community intervention models (see for example, Skogan et al. 2008, on the CeaseFire model), there is a continuing need for developing and evaluating interventions that address community-level factors despite the difficulties that exist with such a broad scope.

The SAFER Latinos program is an attempt to build such evidence vis-à-vis a multilevel participatory model tailored to the specific circumstances of Central American immigrants. These include a pattern of sequential immigration (i.e., parents arriving first and children coming later or youth arriving without parents), which can impact family cohesion; school-related difficulties; community disorganization; a lack of and difficulty accessing services; and the presence of gangs together with a heightened social role for violence. SAFER Latinos is being documented, with implementation manuals, materials, evaluation instruments, and protocols, for potential application to other communities that face a similar complex of aggregate community factors contributing to the pattern of youth violence.

## Community Description

### *Demographics*

The intervention has been implemented in Langley Park, MD, a burgeoning immigrant community very close to the northeast corner of the District of Columbia, in Prince George's County, MD, and bordering on Montgomery County, MD. Langley Park was selected for intervention because of recent increases in violence and gang activity involving Latino youth and a concentrated Latino population in that area.

Although outdated, 2000 Census data for Langley Park indicate a total of 6,214 people; 4,592 households; and 3,342 families, with a population density of 19,678.8 people per square mile. This is most likely a considerable underestimate, given the date of the Census and the crowded and sometimes fluid nature of many households in the community. From the SAFER Latinos fall 2007 baseline survey, Langley Park residents are primarily from El Salvador (33% of youth, 20% of young adults, 36% of parents) and Guatemala (39% of youth, 61% of young adults, and 44% of parents), along with significant numbers from Honduras and Mexico. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of survey respondents were born outside of the US (85% of youth, 99.6% of young adults, and 100% of parents). A significant percentage of residents speak only Spanish (47% of youth, 76% of young adults, and 73% of parents). Among youth surveyed, about 46% reported not currently attending school, and among young adults, 90% reported not currently attending school. Our survey data also documented a substantial percentage of young men without family, living together in crowded apartments to save money. Sixty-four percent of youth survey respondents and almost 78% of young adult respondents were male, a proportion similar to migrant working communities around the world (in which risk behaviors including violence, substance abuse, partner violence, and sex trade/trafficking are present—see, for example, United Nations Development Programme 2006; Puri and Cleland 2006; Martin et al. 1995; Decker and Knight 1990).

### *Crime and Violence*

In the Washington, DC, metro area, gangs such as MS-13, 18th Street, and Vatos Locos, largely composed

of youth from El Salvador and other Central American countries, have been associated with interpersonal violence since the mid to late 1990s. In Prince George's County (PG County), MD, where Langley Park is located, Latinos recently accounted for 21% of all homicides investigated by county police and were victims in 10 of the 24 homicides reported between March and May of 2008 (K. F. Davis, personal communication, June 2008). Recent data (from the National Incident-based Reporting System; US Department of Justice, 2005, 2006, Table 10) show that PG County had the highest total of violent crimes and aggravated assaults known to law enforcement in any jurisdiction in Maryland for 2005 and the highest total of violent crimes and second highest total of aggravated assaults in 2006. The majority of gang-related incidents occur in PG County Police District 1, in the core area of Langley Park.

## Development of the Intervention Model

The situation faced by the Langley Park community called for a broader community-ecological prevention approach. GWU and its highly experienced Latino community partners began the intervention development process with well-developed community collaborative relationships in place. Based on our literature review of risk factors for youth violence and our experience working with high-risk youth, researchers from GWU shared a perspective with our partners regarding the importance of community factors as contributors to youth violence. Through the course of several meetings with LFGW and LAYC staff, as well as individual conversations with community leaders recommended by these partners, we identified several key dynamics within the community that were likely contributors to violence. These factors were supported by selected, informal local data (particularly regarding school performance among Latino youth). From this process, we selected four key mediating factors for the intervention within a social ecology specific to the Latino immigrant community that were hypothesized as major contributors to (mediating factors for) youth violence and thus the targets for the SAFER Latinos intervention:

- *Factor One: Family Cohesion Issues.* Family cohesion and communication problems resulting

from sequential family immigration patterns, where one or more parent immigrates first, followed several years later by children who arrive to often difficult household circumstances (e.g., crowding, new parental partners and children, substance abuse, abuse) and parental attempts to re-assert their role. This dynamic was believed to decrease youth involvement with families and contribute to a reliance on peer socialization among youth—primarily negative socialization. A more recent pattern involved youth arriving first in Langley Park, with no parents here.

- *Factor Two: School-Related Barriers.* Poor school performance and high dropout rates among Latino immigrant youth due to acculturation and language barriers, together with a lack of language-appropriate and culturally appropriate services for these youth, and a lack of supportive knowledge and skills among parents. These factors were also understood to contribute to youth marginalization and involvement in negative peer activity.
- *Factor Three: Community Cohesion, Efficacy, and Alienation.* Low awareness/perception of community support and low community self-efficacy, such that neighborhood assets (e.g., social capital, support networks), as well as social and health services, are not accessed.
- *Factor Four: Gang Presence and the Integration of Violence Norms.* The presence of Latino gangs, several of which are closely identified with Central American immigrants, and consequent integration of violence, substance abuse, and dropping out of school into prevalent youth norms related to gaining status/reputation.

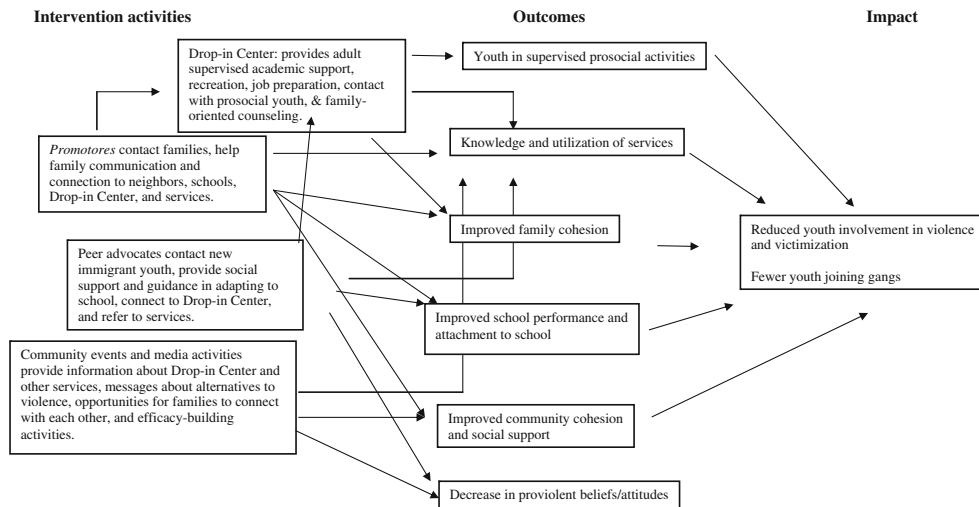
In developing the original intervention model, we viewed these contributing factors as “funnels”: acting together to funnel youth into a high-risk, peer-based, street social environment where violence and other risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse) are prevalent and where the use of violence is both instrumental within the social context and a recognized component of social esteem.<sup>2</sup> The SAFER

Latinos model assumes that these factors interact to create a community ecology that contributes to youth violence and other risk behavior; addressing the factors in a concurrent, coordinated manner is the goal of this community approach. In addition, the increase in services available to the community was also seen as likely to have a positive impact on the community ecology as described (Molnar et al. 2008). The resulting intervention model included the following coordinated set of service activities:

- *Social Promotores*,<sup>3</sup> addressing family cohesion and lack of services: The *Promotores* are Latino lay facilitators whose tasks are to conduct outreach, connect with families, provide basic guidance and support with respect to improving communication between parents and youth, and facilitate referrals to other necessary social services, including those provided through the SAFER community Drop-in Center.
- *Peer Advocates*, addressing school barriers for Latino immigrant youth: Peer Advocates are immigrant Latino students recruited from the high school that serves most Langley Park youth. Their tasks are to work with school English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) coordinators and assist in the orientation and “school acculturation” of new Latino immigrant students, help conduct ongoing support groups for new students, and help Latino students who may be experiencing school difficulties and need someone to listen or need referrals for other services, including academic support. Where possible, Peer Advocates are also trained to provide early conflict avoidance information and support.
- *Community Drop-in Center*, addressing school and family issues and filling a gap in community support services: The Drop-in Center operates directly across the street from the central Langley Park area served by the project. It is home base for the *Social Promotores* and Peer Advocates, and offers academic support, GED classes, recreational activities, and counseling services. It is also Latino-staffed and managed.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, it could be said that we already understood the dynamic as including both a “risk factor push” element and a “social reward pull” element, though the latter was based on reward for negative activities.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from, but not the same as, the *promotora* health educator model often employed among Latino populations with respect to health conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular health.



**Fig. 1** SAFER Latinos community intervention logic model

- *Community Action Events*, addressing community alienation, access to services, and norms with respect to violence: This component includes a range of community events (e.g., small apartment building-level events, participation in larger holiday/other events), communications activities (e.g., street theater, dissemination of public messages), and community efficacy-building activities, together designed to facilitate interaction between the community and support services, disseminate messages about alternatives to violence, and address community perceptions/norms related to violence.

Our intervention logic model is presented in Fig. 1.

**The Intervention Model in Practice**

Throughout implementation of the SAFER model, barriers and “on-the-ground” issues confronted by the project have, of necessity, shaped application of model components. These modifications have been documented and are summarized here.

*Social Promotores*

The SAFER Latinos program began with two full-time and one half-time *Promotores*, representing a mix of experience, with one lead *Promotor* having

social work training/experience and the other two recruited from the community. All are bilingual. *Promotores* were trained in the SAFER intervention concept and in the key areas of activity designated by the model: (a) outreach and community contact, (b) facilitating communication between parents or guardians and children, (c) facilitating communication between parents or guardians and schools, and (d) providing information on and referring families to community support and social services where needed (including the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center). The training involved extensive role-plays and a discussion on limitations of the *Promotor* role as well as legal responsibilities in situations where child abuse/neglect is observed.

*Implementation Experience and Modifications*

Community mistrust was an immediate barrier. Until the program attained sufficient recognition, community members who responded positively to *Promotor* outreach activities often did not follow up on their initial contacts. Moreover, individuals who initially expressed interest in family support services often provided incorrect telephone numbers/addresses (for follow-up), requiring extensive efforts by *Promotores* to regain contact and continue the interaction. We understood this reaction as a “dance” of sorts, where individuals were interested but mistrustful. In any case, the level of effort required limited the overall

caseload to between 15 and 25 families receiving *Promotor* services at any given time.

To address the mistrust issue, two steps were taken. First, we conducted an intensified series of apartment block-level events at almost every apartment complex in the intervention area in order to increase community awareness about and comfort with the SAFER Latinos program. At these events, *Promotores* and other staff (including student Peer Advocates) talked about the program in a family-friendly atmosphere that included piñatas, raffles, and food. Second, the program conducted outreach to all apartment management companies about the SAFER Latinos program, meeting with their representatives for lunch and discussing potential collaboration. As a result, we were able to secure agreement from several of these companies to conduct *Promotor* activities directly at the apartment offices, particularly at strategic times such as during the rental payment period, thus increasing their visibility and availability. Doing so likely addressed another barrier discussed below in relation to the location of the Drop-in Center.

A second barrier concerned the initial collection of process data necessary to document program activities and dosage. *Promotores* were trained on completion of process forms; however, by October of 2007, a new process data recording protocol was instituted requiring direct computer entry. For the community *Promotores*, these data collection requirements presented some difficulties, and significant staff time was devoted to training and support for *Promotores* who had little or no previous experience with data or computers. The additional training, together with continued support and follow-up, improved recording of these data.

### Peer Advocates

Peer Advocates were originally to be recruited at two local high schools attended by Langley Park youth. Recruitment and coordination of Peer Advocate activities was organized through the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) coordinator at each school. Peer Advocates were paid a small stipend for their work. Like Social *Promotores*, Peer Advocates were trained in the task and content areas for their role. Training included (a) background on the study, goals, and process; (b) role and duties of Peer Advocates; (c) communication and mediation skills;

(d) school acculturation support for new immigrant students (a separate manual was developed for this); (e) outreach methods; (f) how to refer students to academic support and job awareness/preparation services as well as for other assistance (primarily at the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center); and (g) the limits of Peer Advocate duties, confidentiality, and safety. The training included extensive role-plays. For reasons of safety and because they are not professionals, Peer Advocates have been prohibited from involvement in (a) drug abuse cases, (b) child abuse cases<sup>4</sup> or family violence, (c) mediating a violent altercation already in progress, and (d) situations where there are illegal activities in evidence.

### Implementation Experience and Modifications

Several school-related barriers arose soon after implementation. First, though we were aware that some Langley Park youth attended one of the high schools (actually the closest high school to Langley Park), it became clear that such attendance was not within the legal jurisdiction for that school and that Langley Park youth were supposed to attend the other high school, even though it is farther away from the community. As a result, the Peer Advocates at the first school were phased out. A second issue concerned referral of students to Peer Advocates. As it turned out, and for understandable reasons, the school administration was reluctant to ask teachers to refer Latino students to Peer Advocates, because the Advocates were not trained professionals, and liability issues could arise. From that point, the Peer Advocate component had to de-emphasize such referrals, focusing more on group activities sanctioned by the school, including monthly support groups for Latino immigrant students that the Peer Advocates helped to run. The Peer Advocates have also participated in specific activities and events for Latino immigrant students as well as general SAFER Latinos outreach presentations. A small number of self-referrals have occurred, where individual Latino students have requested help from a Peer Advocate. Importantly, with respect to the acculturation training task, Peer Advocates began participating

<sup>4</sup> Only health practitioners, educators, human service workers, and police officers are required to file formal reports. Other individuals are required to report incidents to social services or law enforcement but not as a formal report.

in new student/parent orientations conducted by the Prince George's County International Students Office at the high school. Finally, the conflict mediation/prevention role for Peer Advocates was scaled back significantly, in part because individual referrals were curtailed, and because Peer Advocates themselves expressed some reservations about personal involvement in impending or potential violence. SAFER staff, of course, respected these concerns and dropped that task in favor of more generalized messages about alternatives to violence and the provision of support and role modeling.

### The Drop-in Center

The Drop-in Center is managed by SAFER partner the Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (MMYC). The Center offers youth opportunities for participating in adult-supervised prosocial and support activities (e.g., GED classes, computer and arts classes, summer programs) funded largely through the SAFER Latinos program as well as short-term family counseling. Social *Promotores* and Peer Advocates are based at the Drop-in Center.

### *Implementation Experience and Modifications*

A significant implementation challenge arose right away concerning the Drop-in Center site. Originally, the Center was to be located directly in the center of the Langley Park community at a facility (the Mother Theresa Center) planned for construction. Unfortunately, these plans were cancelled due to political and legal issues within the community. That left the SAFER Latinos Drop-in Center without a site, forcing staff to locate a new site as close as possible to the community core. Eventually, the current location was secured on the fourth floor of a small office building (that includes other Latino community services) on the major boulevard that runs through Langley Park. However, its location precludes some of the true “drop-in” characteristics that would have been available in a central community site. Individuals who want to access the Drop-in Center have to make a distinct effort to go there, and recreational activities originally planned for youth have to be carried out elsewhere, requiring transportation. Still, the Center has provided services to many community members in spite of this barrier.

### Community Events and Media Activities

This major component of the SAFER Latinos intervention was the most flexible component simply because a fixed schedule of events and activities could not be set out from the beginning. The proposed set of community events and media included (a) a major kickoff event in February of 2007; (b) holiday-related events, focusing on a holiday theme but including representation by social/community services; (c) drama/street theater activities involving youth, focusing on real-life struggles to succeed in school and connect with family; (d) participation by SAFER Latinos in health fairs, job fairs, and other events; (e) development of radio spots, public service announcements (PSAs), and other media materials; and (f) engagement of youth in development of community messages and materials and in performance at events (e.g., music). This intervention component was managed by the second Latino community partner, the Latino Federation of Greater Washington.

### *Implementation Experience and Modifications*

Early in the implementation phase, the media campaign and major events had to be deferred in favor of a series of smaller, apartment-block events (mentioned earlier) designed to increase residents' awareness of and trust in the SAFER Latinos program. From baseline focus group results, it also became clear that there was a substantial lack of community efficacy and cohesiveness that needed to be addressed. Thus, the rollout of media and events was retooled to take this into account. SAFER staff did participate, as planned, in several community events already underway such as the annual Langley Park Day. However, in addition to the apartment block events, a series of smaller, focused community activities was initiated. First, a set of workshops was held for families, focusing on family communication, how to communicate with schools, signs of gang involvement, and other topics. These workshops were held in an apartment building space, and, after a brief hiatus, are ongoing. A similar set of workshops for young women was held but was dropped due to low attendance. Then, SAFER Latinos brought a youth group coordinator on staff, and a young men's group was initiated. This group convened almost every Friday at a small building

(formerly a community policing facility) located in a popular shopping mall area until the group leader took another position, at which point it was suspended pending the hiring of a new leader. Approximately 20–25 young men from the community attended this group, and eventually, several young women as well. A range of topics were discussed, from decision-making to jobs and violence prevention. The group also conducted various community service efforts and had begun to work with an experimental curriculum teaching community engagement. The idea, following the SAFER Latinos model, is to help create “alternative cohorts” of young men and women in the community who engage in visible and rewarded activities that benefit the community.

Some broader media/community activities were eventually reinstated. Relationships were established with local and major Latino publications, some of which have sent reporters to cover SAFER Latinos activities/events and will be publishing short human-interest pieces about prosocial youth and parents in the community. A press conference was held in February 2008, attended by a number of representatives from the local Latino media as well as a reporter from the major Univision television affiliate. Project staff have been interviewed by the most popular local Spanish-language radio station, Radio Zol. Furthermore, members of the youth group developed and recorded three anti-violence PSAs, which were subsequently broadcast on several area Latino radio stations. A t-shirt contest was held in the community to design a t-shirt and logo for the SAFER Latinos project. A prize for the winning entry was presented at a community cleanup event involving youth group members, project staff, and a representative from the state legislature. More recently, CNN broadcast a segment on SAFER Latinos as part of its “Latino in America” series.

As of mid-2009, the SAFER Latinos project had served a total of approximately 3,374 individuals (unduplicated), including Drop-in Center services, school-based services/events, community outreach, and specific community events. More recently, it is clear that the project has overcome many of the initial trust barriers, as evidenced, for example, by the current backlog of demand from the community for services and family support available at the Drop-in Center. It is also telling in this regard that our recent follow-up data collection was completed at a far more rapid pace than for the baseline data.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

If, as we argue, youth violence is determined by multiple, interactive, and cumulative factors at various levels of the social ecology (NIH 2004) and community factors contribute to youth violence independently of individual and family factors (Lipsey and Derzon 1998), then the SAFER Latinos intervention may provide evidence for an approach addressing such socioecological factors. Although results of follow-up and other evaluation data will be presented separately, information about the development, implementation, and the challenges faced in implementation of the intervention can aid in replication efforts and offer lessons regarding barriers, challenges, and successful strategies.

### Importance of Community Connection

First, working with local community-based organizations and indigenous staff has been critical to an understanding of the community and to the development and implementation of useful strategies. Building relationships with key institutions (e.g., schools, other Latino-serving organizations, faith groups, the police, local media, local Latino businesses) has also been important for implementing SAFER Latinos components. These are by now well-known axioms of community intervention, but they may be at odds with funding timeframes. Relationships take time to develop, particularly in a community that is already marginalized, and funding for this project is limited to 4 years (which includes pre-intervention preparation and Institutional Review Board approval processes as well as analysis): potentially not enough time to change the contributing factors addressed. Moreover, community demographics and dynamics have changed even during the course of the project period, and project components have had to evolve to follow these patterns. These characteristics certainly support consideration of longer funding periods.

### Adjusting the SAFER Model

Even the multifactor ecological model that is the basis for SAFER Latinos cannot address all the contributing factors that exist. Some selection was necessary, in part because it was important that the scope of intervention components not exceed the



funding available. However, during implementation, three additional factors emerged that could be important additions to the model: substance abuse; racial tension; and crowded, difficult housing conditions. Baseline data from our fall 2007 survey show the following for youth age 12–17 in Langley Park: About 20% smoke cigarettes, and about 14% drink alcohol (current use). Sixty-one percent of youth also report that some of their friends smoke cigarettes, 51% say that some friends drink alcohol, and 17% report that some friends use drugs. For young adults age 18–24, almost 30% smoke cigarettes, and about 40% drink alcohol. Sixty-four percent say that some friends smoke cigarettes (9% report that all of their friends smoke); 67% report that some friends drink alcohol (almost 10% saying that all friends drink); and about 14% report that some friends use drugs (note that self-reported use is lower than reported peer use, most likely an indication of reluctance to report personal behavior). Though substance use may not be a direct causal factor for most youth violence, it may be a mediating factor and a proxy for involvement in the high-risk peer social ecology (e.g., through phenomena such as “skipping parties”). During the course of the intervention, racial tension has also been cited by many youth as a factor in both school and community violence, with implications for the composition of gangs as well. For this, additional data are necessary. Finally, housing conditions and crowding became a more urgent issue following the general economic downturn in 2008 as residents found it necessary to share living situations to an even greater extent, with consequences for family cohesion and conflict.

#### Intervention Reach and Evaluation Challenges

In the context of poverty, language and legal issues, discrimination, racism, unemployment, and transience, there is a question as to whether the SAFER Latinos intervention, as implemented, has enough reach to generate the projected community-level impact. The model could be adjusted to address a cohort, which would be easier to measure, or could incorporate both community- and cohort-focused components. Given the need, however, the goal for SAFER was to test and learn from an approach that addresses multiple community factors. To determine the effectiveness of multilevel interventions that

include targeted community-level (cohort) components versus community-level interventions alone would require more complex evaluation designs to parcel out the additive effects of combined interventions.

Evaluating SAFER Latinos does present challenges. First, because effects are assessed at the community, not the individual level (see next section), even when individual- or family-level changes occur, these may not translate into community-level impacts because of insufficient reach. Unfortunately, we are not measuring individual or family changes among those directly participating in any of the components (except through limited, component-specific or anecdotal data) or in what ways these are linked to community impact. Careful documentation of defined intervention components such as Peer Advocates and Social *Promotores* may at least help in establishing the basis for understanding linkages between intervention components and community change.

#### Next Steps

The SAFER Latinos project is now focusing on consolidating and building on the initial implementation and gains made. Lessons learned and barriers overcome, as described above, will assist this process. We now know, for example, the parameters within which the Peer Advocates must operate and can focus attention on organizing their activities to fit in with these constraints as well as maximizing publicity within the school and the community regarding their role. Based on the typical caseload for Social *Promotores*, it is clear that we need to add capacity; thus, one new *Promoter* has been hired, and funding will be sought for more. With respect to the community events and cohesion activities, we are now aware that sustained attendance, even when capacity-building programs are offered, is difficult in a community where economic need is a first priority; these components need to be adjusted for maximum effectiveness and accessibility in a short period of time. Moreover, for all these components, a concern is sustainability. For this reason, the SAFER Latinos project has begun the process of seeking funds to sustain the activities now implemented. This, to a significant degree, will depend upon progress and results that are documented through a rigorous evaluation effort, as described briefly in the next section.

## Planned Evaluation of SAFER Latinos

As a potential model approach, substantial resources have been allocated to evaluating the effectiveness of the SAFER Latinos project at the community level. The evaluation addresses two main research questions. First, is the SAFER Latinos project effective at reducing youth involvement in gangs and violence (impact)? If so, the second research question explores the potential mechanisms through which effectiveness is achieved: Are there changes in the mediating factors (e.g., family cohesion, school performance, community cohesion, violence norms), and to what degree do they account for changes in gang involvement and violence?

These research questions are being evaluated using a quasi-experimental design with baseline (prior to intervention) and follow-up data collections in both the intervention and a control community (Culmore, VA), measuring change in a selected set of aggregate community variables that represent mediating factors and outcomes for youth violence in Langley Park. The data for this evaluation come from four sources: a community survey developed by the SAFER team to measure mediating factors and some impacts (e.g., self-report involvement in violence, victimization); a set of focus groups in each community with youth, parents, and community leaders; community and school data on youth violence and related risk behaviors; and process data of all activities conducted by Social *Promotores*, Peer Advocates, the Drop-in Center, and community events/activities. To obtain a community sample for the survey (not a specific intervention cohort), a randomized cluster-sample strategy is used with apartment buildings as the randomized units.

The intervention began operation with a kickoff event in February 2007. A first round of baseline data was collected in September–December 2006, but because of some limitations, a second baseline collection occurred in the fall of 2007, resulting in better data: the study team had more time to work with the community and establish a trust relationship despite the fear resulting from an increasingly volatile political climate surrounding immigration issues. The second baseline sample included 700 surveys completed in each of the intervention and control communities ( $n = 1,400$ ) and 14 focus groups, 7 in each community. Follow-up data

collection, as noted, was just recently completed (also  $n = 1,400$ ). Baseline data have been analyzed, especially regarding the 12–17 age group, including the use of structural equation modeling and path analysis to test the model. Detailed methods and results from these surveys will be reported in a separate article.

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